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ABSTRACT

Significant differences occur between the philosophies of the academic curriculum, the professors, and the students. Currently, curriculums tend to be predominately modern, while students prefer postmodern education theories. Academic institutions can respond to this cultural change by establishing integrated and interdisciplinary honors programs. This paper examines: (1) selected characteristics of modern curriculums; (2) selected characteristics of postmodern students; and (3) the use of the social construction model to synthesize western cultural changes. Specific applications of this model in the Union County College (Cranford, New Jersey) Honors Program are described in terms of: (1) curriculum design; (2) courses; (3) faculty participation; and (4) student, faculty, and course materials interactions. An appendix includes selected quotations and a list of essential differences between modernism and postmodernism. (JHP)

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DOUBLE CODING: SOME CHARACTERISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HONORS EDUCATION

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Modernism, Postmodernism, and Honors Education

I. Thesis:

The new two cultures problem is no longer between science and the humanities, but between modernism and postmodernism. Because the classroom is part of the culture, this separation between modernism and postmodernism is larger than the artistic and literary movements from which its actions and reactions came. This separation's primary educational significance is that while the curriculum is predominately modern, the students that curriculum hopes to educate are predominately postmodern. This dissonance is more than a media-hyped "generation gap"; it signals real distinctions in attitudes, expectations and outcomes among the academy, its professors and its students.

In responding to this situation, colleges should avoid a neo-conservative restructuring of modernism's principles as the answer to a failed culture. In fact, this belief that the culture has failed is, in part, a modernist position. There are specific ways colleges in general and their specific programs, most particularly Honors Program, can respond to the cultural swing from modernism to postmodernism. In order to do this, we should understand that the above cultural characteristics have implications for education. Because while the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism are real enough, they both can be seen as extreme avant gardist positions which in fact are capable of synthesis in their responses to key cultural crises. That is, the reactions of each to each--modernists often see postmodernism as anti-modernism, and postmodernists often see modernism as an angst-ridden anachronism--in fact can form a remarkable synthesis on social and cultural conditions. This synthesis goes under the rubric of social constructionism and its positions, if still relatively new, can be very helpful in constructing the necessary dialogue between the academy, its professors and its students.

Each institution because of its unique nature will respond to the cultural climate and social constructionist's ideas in unique ways. And I think such responses might begin in Honors Program. Because of their often integrated or interdisciplinary nature, Honors Programs can begin to articulate the possibilities of synthesizing faculty expectations with students' attitudes in new and challenging ways.

What follows are particularized generalization. That is, these are the characteristics I've seen at my college and have enough contact with other institutions through colleagues, visits or publications to know, despite exceptions, that the characteristics are in fact in place in most institutions.

II. Characteristics of the Modern Curriculum

Assumption: Until sometime around 1950 the American culture could be considered almost exclusively modernist, and since the modernist movement had been around almost a century, most faculty and administrators consider the modernist curriculum to be, in fact, the "traditional" curriculum. Daniel Bell and Charles Newman, among others, have made specific references to the modernist characteristics in professional and academic life. Some of the essential characteristics of the modernist curriculum are:

A) Hierarchical structure; authority is based on position;

B) Authority is posited in the specialized elite who pass knowledge down;

C) Departments determine the shape and content of curriculum; departments tend to be overtly collaborative, but are covertly competitive collaboration is really disguised compromise;

D) Departmentalized areas of specialization with both a hierarchy and a concomitant narrowing of specialization as the education advances: K-8, generalist; 9-12, departments; undergraduate, majors; graduate, majors with specializations;

E) Key concept of education: the transmission of information, content, processes and skills from the elite authority to the student;

F) Ability to absorb the above via reading and writing abilities constitutes the tasks of initiation into the academic dialect;

G) Essential belief in the maximalization of content, the multiplicity of interpretation, the possibilities of contradictions and paradoxes; the belief in personal choice without necessarily a method to make that choice;

H) All curriculum decisions are made by elite faculty or the corresponding department, hence students are disenfranchised from the process because they are not initiated yet;

I) Imperialization of the elite self: the self is the central orientation whether it be self-expression, self-potential, self-actualization or self-consciousness;

J) Because of its elitist stance, modernism tends to make an adversary out of those not in the know. The students are thus not only uninitiated, disenfranchised, but can be an enemy.

III. Characteristics of the Postmodern Student

Assumption: Most American students born into American society after 1960 and who had access to the full range of American media technology (stereos, radios, tv's) share in the cultural characteristics of Postmodernism. These characteristics are:

A. The primacy of opinion; authority has been leveled so each one of us is entitled to "one's own opinion;"

B. The multiplicity of competing opinions (teachers, media, parents, peers); none of whom has any absolute authority;

C. Pluralistic and passive acceptance of undifferentiated experience; the "promiscuous cool" of postmodernism (as Donoghue notes) allows for value free experience;

D. Experience is more important than knowledge;

E. Indeterminate, fragmented relativistic view of knowing and being: "Everything is relative;"

F. Belief in the surface and the obvious; meaning is depth, experience is surface; "Everything is cool;"

G. Deliberate relaxation or avoidance of angst-driven meaning making;

H. Local, peer construction of reality;

I. Ironic distancing of the "serious" because the "serious" implies a hierarchy and an elite who determine the serious. Figures such as Bruce Willis (aka David Addison), David Lee Roth, David Letterman and Bill Murray are examples of the ironic detachments from the serious;

J. Ironic stance towards everything; the loss of innocence whether real or perceived has taken the shock out of anything and everything;

K. Minimal aesthetic: less is enough; a deliberate deconstruction of all interpretations or their multiciplity; again "the cool surface". And, more of the same is more of the same; postmodern music is often formulaic and very repetitious because those very repetitions give not only a familiar pattern to experience, but frees the listener from personal choice;

L. Language is problematical, so much so that silence is often preferable to the tortured struggle with imprecise, indeterminate meaning;

M. Since progress cannot be infinitely sustained, a belief that the present is the only moment worth anyone's time;

N. Consumer orientation towards everything. Its implications are given by Gerald Graff when he says "advanced capitalism needs to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, all continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption". (In Newman)

IV. Characteristics of the Social Construction Model.

Hypothesis: It is my hypothesis that social construction can be seen as a synthesis of both modernist and postmodernist responses to Western cultural changes. Its characteristics are:

A. The leveling of authority which has provided a greater opportunity for faculty and students to jointly share in the making of the culture because:
1. Truth is the shared enterprise of like-minded individuals;

2. "Human thought is consummately social; social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications." (Geertz in Bruffee, 1984)

3. Given these, several key points emerge:

1. The curriculum can be thus a social construction; therefore it is something which by its very nature is integrative;

2. Since human thought is intrinsically linked with the changes in social condition, human thought is in a continual process of developing and changing.

3. Hence any curriculum or program should see itself as changing, integrative, and social;

4. The students by the fact that they are members of the society are automatically franchised into the process of meaning making;

5. It follows then that "writing is a social act, like the thought that produces it." (Bruffee, 1984). Therefore, writing is more than learning the academic dialect, and is seen as a central empowering device for meaning making;

6. And all learning is seen as part of the "endless conversation" of humanity, not a collection of facts which can be by measured by objective tests; learning, therefore, becomes a collaboration between faculty and students.

V. Specific Applications in Union County College's Honors Program

A. Curriculum Design: There are four courses in the Program each is integrated by the following concepts.

1. Since truth and meaning are made by communities of like-minded individuals, all knowledge is interrelated;

2. Knowing should and does impact the being of the knower; thus knowledge is not just a content to learn but should influence the life of the knower;

3. An objective reconstruction of the past is impossible; thus we must articulate and examine our modernist-postmodernist's biases, and how they can shape and color our responses;

4. Nonetheless historical documents, whether it be a Bach fugue, a Shakespeare play, or a Platonic dialogue, must be appreciated as social constructions of their times.

B. The courses are:

1. Knowing and Being I: An Historical Approach. This course goes from the Jewish Bible and the Greeks through the Rise of Christianity to the Reformation and the Rise of Science.

2. Knowing and Being II: Modern and Contemporary Approaches. Using Faust as a seminal figure, we examine the various strands from such thinkers as Rousseau, Kant, Marx, Freud, Eliot, Wittgenstein who make up the Romantic-Modern-Postmodern movements that are culture in the West. Painting and Music also play a central role.

3. Honors Seminar: Technology and Postmodern Society. The material of this seminar will change from year-to-year. This course was developed by participating members of the Honors Program, from different departments, who designed a course that is a logical, integrative extension of Knowing and Being II.

4. Independent Study: In consultation with a faculty member the student designs and completes a project centered on some problem, concern or interest developed by the previous three courses.

C. Faculty Participation

1. Notice of syllabus and readings for all Honors courses are released to faculty with an invitation to attend Honors classes.

2. Seminars are conducted by Honors Core Faculty at the beginning of each semester to explain the design, methods, and content of the Honors courses for that semester. These seminars are especially designed to include all of the faculty and administration in the cultural conversation of the issues voiced in the Honors Courses.

3. Although faculty tend to self-select into the Program as participants, faculty who do present in the course are encouraged to take a generalist, cultural conversation approach as opposed to a narrow specialist's approach. Participating faculty are encouraged to attend both the seminars and the classes to see how their presentation will fit into the flow of the course.

D. Collaboration

The social constructionist model rests on the fundamental notion that all members of the Honors Program form a community of like-minded people. Thus,

1. Students are enfranchised in the following ways:

a. selected students are voting members of the Honors Advisory Committee;

b. students have a say in curriculum design; in open forum they are encouraged to voice their ideas on texts, presentations, course load, and any other academic matters;

c. students on their own have developed a Peer Mentoring System which is run by students for students on any ideas they have concerning the Program.

2. The Forum
Since we view culture as a forum for the cultural conversation, a three hour forum is held (in addition to the scheduled class) every week to:

a. develop the sense of community;

b. share ideas and concerns among students and faculty;

c. to follow-up on class presentations;

d. to prepare ideas and drafts for major papers.

3. Honors Faculty
The faculty who run the Honors Courses (Core Honors Faculty) are made up now of five members: The Director who is from the English Department, one sociologist, one psychologist, a member of the business and computers department and another member of the English Department This year's Visiting Scholar was a Princeton graduate with a doctorate in Philosophy and Religion. Other presentators have been from History, Mathematics, Biology and Chemistry.

4. Honors Advisory Committee is a collaborative body made up of the following members: Honors Core Faculty, 3 Honors students, Dean of Students, Director of Institutional Research, Dean of Continuing Education and a representative from Academic Services.

5. Texts:
A. Currently a text is being written for the Honors Program by three Honors Faculty. Tentatively titled, The Languages of Humanity, it is a collaborative effort which we will posit a social constructionist understanding of Western culture. Its two volumes will parallel the Knowing and Being courses.

B. Two video-texts have been produced (A New Light in the World: Medieval Christian Art and Music and Postmodernism: Documents) which integrate art, music and literature in a video format.

APPENDIX

"I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives... Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age." (Lyotard)

"The postmodern scene begins and ends with transgression as the lightening-flash which illuminates the sky for an instant only to reveal the immensity of darkness within; absence as the disappearing sign of the limitlessness of the void within and without... (Kroker and Cook).

"The contemporary writer - the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part - is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author; but he died: now no one knows the plot." Ronald Sukenick

"All distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the past and the present, between truth and untruth, will be abolished." Raymond Federman

"...once a certain number of people believe that a concept like the Post-modern marks a real change in the cultural climate, that change becomes a reality to be reckoned with, even if the reality is not exactly what most users of the term think it is." (Graff in Newman).

"The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. The new reality from which it came and may also be much else. It's and itself, if successful." (Donald Barthmelme)

"Reality is not a matter of fact, it is an achievement." (William H. Gass)

"Postmodernism is aimless, anarchic, amorphous, self-indulgent, inclusive, horizontally structured, and aims for the popular." (Clement Greenberg)

"Is post-modernism a mere, possibly decadent, development of modernism, or did it fight through to a real independence? My argument will affirm the latter proposition..." (Butler).

"Actually, I believe that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category-- or, better still, a Kunstwollen, a way of operating... The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently." (Eco)

You can't really be a fallen Protestant," she said. "How can there be any guilt?"

"There can be guilt," I said. "It's my piety, I can cry if I want to." (Lorrie Moore, Anagrams).

MODERNISM - POSTMODERNISM: ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES

1. Modernism is always difficult.
   Postmodernism is always "promiscuously" cool.

2. Mod. Struggle is the key.
   PM.: Cool is the key.

3. M.: Salvation is of, by, and for the self. Deep subjectivity.

   PM.: The self is as best cultural construction, which is certainly not fixed, is, therefore, certainly not "found" or "discovered", but is made through cultural conversations. The loss of deep subjectivity. "My hypothesis is that the organization of mind is a cultural artifact based on the learning of a local concept of 'self.'" (Harre, p. 48).

4. M.: Human nature has radically changed in the 20th century. Virginia Woolf: "On or about December, 1910 human nature changed."

   PM.: Talk not about human nature, but the nature of being human.

5. M.: Suffering through the beleaguered self is usually the locus of emotional attention.

   PM.: Without a self, there is nothing to be beleaguered, hence there is no struggle of the individual against anything. There is no individual, only relationships based on language. The only "struggle" is one of style.

6. M.: Meaning is self-centered.

   PM.: Since meaning is relational, language is all.

7. M.: Epiphanies and climaxes are central.

   PM.: The landscape of tension, meaning, and authority is flattened. This is the world of ever-moving surfaces. Hence, there are no resolutions, since nothing has been intensified.

8. M.: Meaning is arrived through the recognitions of our common essences.

   PM.: There is no meaning outside of us; and since there are no objective absolutes, there are "no common essences," just, as Richard Rorty says, "decisions to be."

9. M.: Nature is a source of power, belief, and acts as a model for meaning making.

   PM.: Nature is neither "out there" nor "in here", but existence rests solely on the language connections made between others. Hence, the broadest possible view of language must be embraced. Meaning comes from relationships not from an outside, unchanging source.

Postmodernist art therefore, tends to have a more meditative, some might say oriental, flavor. In speaking about the music he and his fellow, radical composers were attempting, John Cage said: "The novelty of our work derives from our having moved away from simply private human concerns towards the world of nature and society of which we are all a part. Our intention is to affirm life, not to bring order out of chaos, not to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we are living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord." Further Cage noted, "I believe what we are doing is exploring a field, that the field is limitless and without qualitative differentiations but with multiplicity of differences, that our business has changed from judgement to awareness." (In Rockwell, Music)

10. M.: Sexual identification critical.

PM.: Gender blurring, as with all other genres, is necessary. Androgyny as style.

11. M.: Music with its ability to fuse form and content is the major artistic construct.

PM.: All genres are blurred; boundaries between the arts presuppose objective, pure categories that belie the integrative aesthetic of experience. Active performance not static categorizations is the key. Tensions work against the expected.

12. M.: Maximalist Aesthetic: the avant garde breaks down the wall in revolutionary new ways and allows for the stream of consciousness to pick up every flotsam and jetsam of the world in order to establish a fuller meaning of the world. Eliot's Wasteland, Joyce's Ulysses and Woolf's To The Lighthouse are prime examples of the Maximalist Aesthetic.

PM.: Minimalist Aesthetic: less is more. Surfaces instead of depths; unfoldings instead of climaxes; subtlety over drama. Repetition, fragmentation, juxtaposition are the major forms.
According to John Barth, the literary manifestations of minimalism, known under various titles as "K-Mart Realism" and "Diet-Pepsi Minimalism" has the following characteristics:

1. stripped-down vocabulary;
2. stripped-down syntax
3. stripped-down rhetoric with a deemphasis on figures of speech;
4. non-emotive tone;
5. minimal character;
6. minimal exposition;
7. minimal mises en scene;
8. minimal action;
9. minimal plot.

Major minimalist writers are Donald and Frederick Barthelme, (D.B.: "The fragment is the only form I trust.") Ann Beattie (Distortions, Secrets and Surprises), Raymond Carver (What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and Will You Please Be Quiet, Please), Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robinson, and Tobias Wolff The Barracks Thief). (Barth p.2)

13. M.: Authority is based on position, status or potential.

PM.: Authority is based on authorship; the one who does creates, makes, the one whose being and knowing are most fused has the authority. Actuality not potential.

14. M.: The quality of the struggle determines the quality of the person.

PM.: Everything is equal; good, better, best doesn't exist in a flattened landscape-- a cloud is as important as a president.

15. M.: Originality is crucial.

PM.: Finding and making relationships is also art. Art can be found anywhere, everyone is an artist. Everything is beautiful if you just look at it differently. As one artist recently said: "A radio is a musical instrument we all can play."
Art critic Harold Rosenberg: "If you inhabit a sacred world, you find art rather than make." For Roland Barthes it is the world's compossibility more than its potentiality that interests artists. "...it is by tying fragments of events together that meaning is generated, it is by tirelessly transforming these events into functions that structure is created. The writer...sees the meaning of the inert units in front of him only be relating them..." (in Kostelanetz) This may explain the environment soaked music of Cage, the collagist music of Berio, and the boxes of Joseph Cornell.

16. M.: A world of intense moments; "a lifetime burning the in every moment," as Eliot said.

PM.: A world of every changing fluidity. This is a world of motion not emotion. Unfolding interrelationships is the approach.

17. M.: One of the major struggles of the modernist hero is to fight against middle class values.

PM.: Full and open acceptance of middle class values. No high, middle, or low brow distinctions. Donoghue: "The consumption of objects is already an ideology, and a successful one." The positive side of this is the embracing of the ordinary, the Appollinairian "the heroic of the everyday." The negative side, as some see it, is the open acceptance of the slick and commercial. "Slick makes for a greater surface."

18. M.: Doing one's own thing; being apart=solitary.

PM.: Tuning into society; being a part = solidarity.

19. M.: Since the locus of grief is death, humor is always bleak, black, and/or absurd. Ex. Beckett, Waiting for Godot.

PM.: Since the self is an illusion, anyone who takes the self seriously is a source of humor. EX. all people in power-based positions of authority, landowners, politicians, priest of all religions, and professors are prfect targets. Ex. Beckett, Waiting for Godot.

20. M.: Intensity through commitment.

PM.: Poise through passivity. "A passive acceptance of undifferentiated experience." (Butler, p. 47).

21. M.: Art is life.

PM.: Life is art.

22. M.: Evolutionary.

PM.: Revolutionary.

23. M.: Goal oriented.

PM.: Experience oriented.

24. M.: The search for the Jamesian "felt life." Life is on the spiritual inside.

PM.: The acceptance of the reflective surface. Godard: "Art is not the reflection of a reality, it is the reality of the reflection."

25. M.: A fight against or at least a critical attitude towards technology.

PM.: An open acceptance of technology and the technology of technique.

26. M.: The struggle toward self-identification leads to Angst.

PM.: A deliberate relaxation of Angst; this can be seen especially in Pop Art.

27. M.: The locus of meaning in a painting is in its form and content.

PM.: A painting can be the object itself; a painting is not necessarily about something, it is something. This is true of most abstract painting, whether it be Expressionist-- Pollock, Rothko-- or Impressionist--Newman, Reinhardt, Kelly.

"Pure abstraction, of which Minimalism is one of the purer manifestations, doesn't intend so much to empty art of content as to free it from fatty layers of rhetoric." (Rockwell, NYT.)

28. M.: "work"

PM.: "text"

29. M.: personal choice and self-expression

PM.: Formula allows for the release of self assertion. Hence, much Postmodernist art is overdetermined and theory-bound. "It is in the light of this formalism in abstract painting [And most PM art] that the conceptualist and minimalist schools can be seen to have marked the inevitable triumph of theory over art." (Butler, p. 128).

30. M.: emotional attachment

PM.: ironic detachment by what Charles Jencks calls "double coding."

31. M.: Organic approach to synthesis

PM.: unorganic use of fragments, collage, and pastiche
Venturi: "A clash is as good as a resolution."
Olsen: "I do not seek a synthesis, I seek a melee."
"The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation." (Derrida in Foster)

32. M.: elitist

PM.: pluralistic

33. M. : self-critical based on an assumption of mimesis

PM.: deconstruction
"The deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernist theory presupposes that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referred... Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference." (Owen in Foster)

34. M.: Thinking is something for the elite and is essentially self-generated

PM.: "Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications." (Geertz in Bruffee, 1984)